

## Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping

# The GreenMan



## Terrific Townhouse Gardens

There's no denying that townhouse communities are popping up all over our region. Townhouses are popular and often more affordable than single family homes, and with a bit of horticultural sleight of hand, they can provide almost as many satisfying garden options as larger yards.

The trick to mastering these smaller, confined landscape areas is to realize the inherent limitations of your site, and to create the illusion of more space.

First of all, remember that this is not a normal landscaping project. Your 500 to 1,000 square foot patch of earth, possibly with neighbors on each side, will not accommodate a towering oak. In fact, large trees can make small spaces seem even smaller.

That's not to say that trees are not welcome in your miniature back-forty. In fact, smaller trees, or shrubs trained into tree-form, can and should provide visual anchors or structure for your overall design. Choose species which feature open "scaffolding," as well as year-round appeal, such as serviceberry, flowering crabapple, fringe tree, redbud, or some of the exquisite Japanese maples, with their intricately fine-cut leaves and colorful foliage.

Espaliered trees can also become vital elements in a sunny yard encompassed by a tall fence. A host of fruit and ornamental species are available at area nurseries, already trained to grow vertically with formally-spaced branches stretching out across a flat surface. Instead of a dull expanse of fence, you could enjoy a living wall of tasty apples, pears, plums, and apricots, or colorful magnolias, hollies, junipers, and yews.

Of course, the goal is not merely to camouflage fences and fill in empty space. A townhouse garden should strive to appear larger and more varied than it really is. One of the most successful approaches is to divide the yard into several "garden rooms," each with a unique character.

For example, plant a free-flowing hedge along the outside edge of a patio using ornamental grasses. Select up to several species of the taller grasses to provide variety in



color and texture. Plant the grasses in odd-numbered clumps, all of the same species, and, for additional color and contrast, surround each grouping with masses of colorful perennials, such as daylilies, black-eyed susans, joe-pye weed, and coneflowers.

These plantings will physically and visually separate your patio or outdoor living area from the rest of the garden, and cleverly tease the eye into thinking that the yard goes on quite a bit further. Moreover, these graceful grasses, gently tossed by a breeze, also provide a delightful sense of motion, which will make your landscape seem larger.

A second-story deck need not serve as merely a viewing platform. Along the outer edge place one or more trellises in or against decorative containers or tubs. These structures can then sport a dazzling collection of clematis or other ornamental climbers. Properly arranged, these vertical elements can similarly separate your deck from the rest of your garden, providing a colorful frame for gazing outward, while also adding a welcome bit of privacy from the neighbors.

And don't forget that your deck structure itself can be visually softened by training colorful climbers and vines against the otherwise stark supporting posts and railings of a second-story deck.

Beyond the deck and patio, you can further separate your yard into unique areas with the addition of structures such as pergolas, garden arches, and arbors. Any of these can provide living windows to the

rest of your garden, an incomplete glimpse of the whole, which implies mystery and inspires curiosity.

In smaller spaces, traditional wooden gazebos might seem well out of place and scale, but townhouse gardeners can turn to a number of recently available metal and wrought-iron gazebos, which are little more than attractive frameworks onto which perennial or annual vines can be trained. Quickly and inexpensively, another garden room is created, as is a secondary destination for entertaining or relaxing. Just add a bistro table, chairs, and bottle of wine, and you might forsake your deck altogether.

Small spaces have other advantages for gardeners on a budget. Ponds and other water features can frequently cost a great deal in both money and maintenance responsibilities. Yet for a townhouse garden, one can easily manage a smaller, prefabricated pond, pre-planted whiskey barrel wetland, or solar-powered fountain.

Even a single Victorian gazing ball, faux-gothic concrete statue, or gleaming copper birdbath can become a unique and dramatic centerpiece in your garden. Exercise restraint, however, and employ these elements sparingly. In a small space, too many "artistic" elements can quickly become clutter.

The divisions you create in your yard using trees, planting areas, and foliage-draped structures should be joined together with a free-flowing pathway meandering around the plantings and through structures and other garden rooms. Strive to create

a route wherein each turn will reveal a new and interesting view. Avoid straight paths which will unfortunately create an impression of cells, rather than the illusion of an unfolding series of gardens.

And don't forget about the plants! Small space gardening requires more planning and care in plant selection. If your townhouse or a neighboring fence casts a deep shadow over your garden, you will need to think of plants best suited for shade.

Select plants with extended bloom periods, and interweave plants with varied flowering periods, so that no bed is ever without interesting color or texture. Also use layered plantings, such as placing spring bulbs under later-blooming perennials.

Add distinctive wrought-iron hanging baskets and richly glazed containers overflowing with annuals to add spots of color to drab areas. Containers also allow you to use exotic tropical plants and tender perennials outdoors during warmer weather; just bring them inside before late season frosts.

Clearly, the challenges posed by a townhouse lot are offset by using the site creatively. For most homeowners, a yard is just a yard. For townhouse gardeners, it's an opportunity to create a world (or worlds) in miniature, with vine-covered entertaining spaces, a pleasant path toward a gurgling fountain, a kitchen garden thriving beneath an espaliered apple tree. In reality, the only limiting thing about a townhouse garden is the imagination.



The GreenMan Show is produced for County Cable Montgomery by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Office of Public Information. It airs daily on Cable Channel 6 and can also be

viewed on the Internet. For a complete schedule and online access, visit [www.greenmanshow.com](http://www.greenmanshow.com).

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